

Advancing protection mechanisms and security guarantees in Colombia's marginalised territories

Introduction

In recent years, Colombia has been experiencing an intensification of insecurity and instability due to a triple crisis: (i) the reconfiguration of violent non-state groups in a context of ongoing armed conflict, (ii) the collateral effects of the political and social crisis in neighbouring Venezuela, including mass migration and illicit economies on the border, and (iii) the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.

This triple crisis disproportionately affects communities in marginalised territories and jeopardises peace process implementation in Colombia. The ongoing violence and insecurity in these communities demonstrate that people-centred security and protection must be strengthened. This is key to ensuring that people and communities throughout the country can develop their life projects in peace.

Our recent analyses – including those shared during a cross-stakeholder forum in March 2022 (Figure 1) – allow us to identify some key components for progressing towards a more holistic way of thinking about security in Colombia:

1. Strengthen violence **prevention** by acting against the sources of risks and not simply by shielding targets;
2. Create and strengthen **collective protection** mechanisms and practices based on community perspectives and applying an intersectional approach;
3. Improve **coordination** between Colombian state institutions and governmental agencies to effectively address the structural factors that generate insecurity, including inequality, social exclusion, and the criminalisation and stigmatisation of social leaders.

The CONPEACE Cross-Stakeholder Forum

During a virtual forum on 3 March 2022, issues related to protection mechanisms and security guarantees were addressed using the CONPEACE methodology. Our approach involves three steps. First, it facilitates dialogue between different sectors to increase understanding of the triple crisis; second, it recognises progress in mitigating adverse effects; and third, it works towards a consensus on avenues for action that effectively address the humanitarian crisis and define a roadmap towards inclusive peace with security and stability.

The forum was attended by 37 participants, including 16 women, representing various sectors: state institutions and Colombian government agencies, the international community including UN and OAS agencies and missions, as well as various representatives of academia and local civil society, including representatives of Afro-Colombian communities, indigenous peoples, and peasant communities.

Figure 1: The Cross-Stakeholder Forum, 3 March 2022

Key findings of the Cross-Stakeholder Forum: The challenges

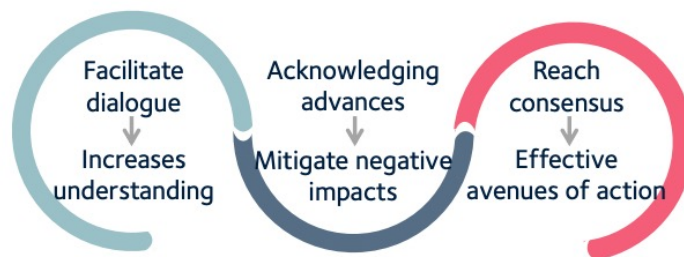


Figure 2: CONPEACE’s Cross-Stakeholder Forum approach

Acting on these components over the next decade will consolidate and sustain what has already been achieved by the 2016 Peace Agreement and move towards a more secure, inclusive, and egalitarian future to meet the population’s needs. This includes promoting meaningful dialogue and joint work with the people living in the different territories most affected by violence.

Colombia must conceive of security as a public good from a people-centred as well as national security focus. This should be based on meaningful intersectional dialogue that includes community participation.

This report presents several policy implications and recommendations aimed at the Colombian government, the international community, and civil society in Colombia to create inclusive, effective, and lasting solutions to help improve the security of communities in Colombia’s marginalised territories.

The policy implications and recommendations emphasise the urgent need to address the grave situation currently faced by the communities most vulnerable to violence and humanitarian suffering.

Lack of articulation and harmonisation of security instruments and policies to the territorial context.

It is evident that the civilian authorities and the Colombian security forces have not yet adapted existing public policy instruments on security to the different territorial contexts.

There is currently a reconfiguration of illegal armed groups in the country, including dissidents of the former FARC-EP guerrilla, the ELN, and groups inherited from paramilitarism, which disproportionately affect some of the country’s territories (Figure 4).

Key questions from the Cross-Stakeholder forum

What steps should the incoming Colombian government, the security forces, the Ombudsman’s Office, and international partners - in particular the UN Verification Mission and UNHCR - take to effectively reinforce protection mechanisms and guarantee the security of social leaders, ex-combatants, human rights defenders, migrants and refugees, and inhabitants of marginalised territories?

How can institutions in Colombia adopt and migrate their policies towards a more holistic, people-centred, and intersectional concept of security that includes the perspectives of women, rural, indigenous, Afro-Colombian, and LGBTQ+ communities in response to violence, crime and conflict?

How can the National Police, the Colombian Armed Forces, and the international community learn from populations in border regions to strengthen security from the individual and increase the political participation of marginalised communities?

Figure 3: Discussion questions from the Cross-Stakeholder Forum, 3 March 2022

Furthermore, there is a blurred line between conflict and organised crime actors, the Colombian state has not yet filled the vacuum left by the FARC-EP when it demobilised, and territorial disputes between armed groups have led to a high level of violence in Colombia's marginalised territories. There is currently a high level of geographical concentration of violence in regions that have historically suffered most from the armed conflict, such as Cauca and Chocó and the departments bordering Ecuador and Venezuela. Between January and July 2022, 109 social leaders and human rights defenders and 31 Peace Accord signatories were killed. In the same period, 58 massacres occurred, and 205 people lost their lives (INDEPAZ 2022). This dynamic makes it necessary to re-evaluate the national strategies that the government has been implementing so far.

A reactive, individualised approach to safety and security

Many protection approaches in the departments most affected by violence focus on individuals. The absence of collective protection mechanisms and a reactive security approach leaves many communities unprotected.

Lack of trust in the institutions

There is distrust in the institutional actors responsible for promoting and guaranteeing the rule of law. The principal opinion polls in Colombia over the last three years have recorded a drop in public confidence in the security forces. Mistrust is also related to the lack of implementation of security and protection plans and strategies. There are vast differences in institutional capacities between national, departmental, and municipal governments.

In addition, there often needs to be a clear definition of the roles and responsibilities of security actors that effectively translate into improved security conditions in the territory. Furthermore, the lack of trust is associated with the absence of dialogue and meaningful participation of communities, including the lack of harmonisation of policies and plans at the national level with existing mechanisms for protection and peaceful coexistence within and among grassroots communities, including among different ethnic groups.

Exclusion and stigmatisation

There is a feeling among representatives of marginalised communities, and especially among ethnic and peasant communities, that public policies in the country continue to be imposed from Bogotá without due consultation and excluding local communities from defining land use. This leads to situations where national political interests and international economic interests are privileged, as in the case of mining and agribusiness, creating an asymmetry in terms of land access and use rights. This results in a feeling of exclusion and a lack of meaningful dialogue in the design of policies in the country's most marginalised territories, while increasing the stigmatisation and security risks faced by community leaders who promote prior consultation.

Public policy implications

1. Strengthen prevention and target security analysis and mechanisms at the sources of risk

- Security policies and initiatives need to reflect territorial realities and focus analyses on threats: not on the person threatened but on where they arise from and how they can be defused. Focusing analyses on the sources of risk will facilitate the discovery of patterns of insecurity and how they are linked to social, geographical, and economic factors.
- In operational terms, academia needs to analyse sources of risk (e.g. related to the presence of armed groups and illicit economies) in order to help the government strengthen systems such as the Early Warnings issued by the Ombudsman's Office, and thus improve the functioning of the Intersectoral Commission for Rapid Response to Early Warnings (Comisión Intersectorial para la Respuesta Rápida a las Alertas Tempranas, CIPRAT) and the monitoring capacity of the National Commission for Security Guarantees (Comisión Nacional de Garantías de Seguridad).
- This would strengthen proactive and preventive security mechanisms – based on understanding the factors that explain the geographical concentration of violence and the reasons and actors that constitute such risks – and not reactive responses that privilege saturation with the security forces. Such mechanisms should be preventive, people-centred, collective, sustainable over time, and complementary to the current approach of individual protection schemes.
- Apart from failing to deactivate risk, the provision of individualised security as a cornerstone of protection policy is fiscally unsustainable, especially given budgetary and operational constraints. Analyses of sources of risk can help prevent victimising events and apprehend perpetrators.

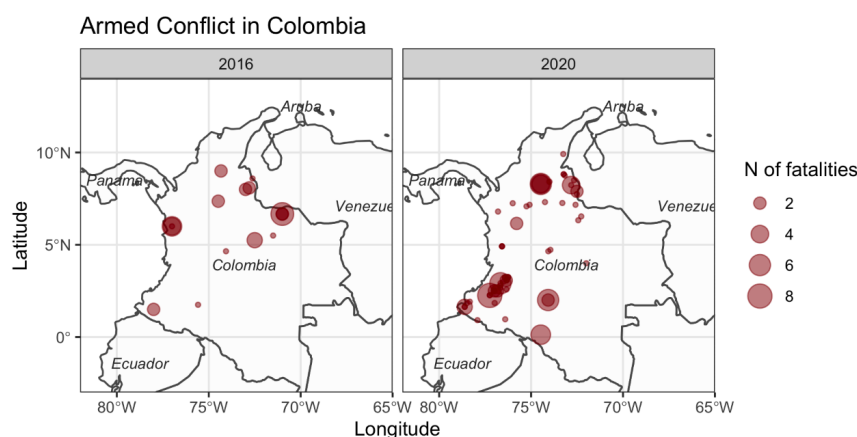


Figure 4: Conflict dynamics in Colombia, 2016–2020^[1]

^[1] © Katerina Tkacova. Sources: UCDP Georeferenced Event Dataset (GED) Global version 21.1; Pettersson, Therese, Shawn Davis, Amber Deniz, Garoun Engström, Nanan Hawach, Stina Högladh, Margareta Sollenberg, and Magnus Öberg (2021). Organized violence 1989–2020, with a special emphasis on Syria. *Journal of Peace Research* 58(4); Sundberg, Ralph and Erik Melander (2013). Introducing the UCDP Georeferenced Event Dataset. *Journal of Peace Research* 50(4).

2. Create and promote collective protection practices based on community perspectives

- It is important to strengthen collective protection measures from below, facilitating the replication of existing good practices of non-violent collective protection, such as the Indigenous Guards (Guardias Indígenas) and Afro-Colombian Guards (Guardias Cimarronas).
- International organisations and civil society can contribute to this process of learning and knowledge exchange between communities, both to build capacity (with support, training and money) at the community level and to follow up at higher levels (where the black box of public policy is found).
- To improve the protection response in isolated territories, it is key for the government to promote collective protection mechanisms, advance in meaningful dialogue with ethnic authorities, and maintain people's trust in the reincorporation process. This entails better community participation, less imposition of strategies, and the intensification of collaborative work with communities to develop local capacities. It is also essential to broaden citizen participation, especially of ethnic communities, in the development and implementation of plans.
- Governments at central, regional, and municipal levels should engage in dialogue with community authorities (including of minority ethnicities and peasants) to maintain the population's confidence in the peace process and effectively implement collective protection mechanisms. These dialogues require a differential and intersectional approach that recognises the vulnerabilities but also the potentials of marginalised groups.
- The government should encourage a differential approach to security guarantees that builds on successful local mechanisms and strengthens existing policies such as the Comprehensive Security and Protection Programme for Communities and Organisations in the Territories created by Decree 660/2018 (Figure 5).

Decree 660 / 2018: Comprehensive Security and Protection Programme for Communities and Organisations in the Territories.

Decree 660 of 2018 is a specific example of a public policy instrument that already exists in Colombian law but has yet to be implemented.

Ethnic communities consider this instrument as the basis for a public security policy that must recognise differential approaches and territorial realities.

This instrument emphasises Afro-Colombian and indigenous communities as key actors in developing and implementing security and protection plans at the territorial level.

Figure 5: Decree 660 / 2018

3. Improved articulation of the state to address structural issues that generate insecurity

- The government must increase its support to civilian institutions in marginalised areas of Colombia and guarantee access to and effective functioning of local justice mechanisms. The government needs to improve complementarity between the various administrative levels of the state and transform the state into an entity that contributes to the transfer of knowledge and good practices of local protection and security among communities in marginalised territories. In addition, local spaces for dialogue (e.g. Peace Councils) should be strengthened. It must also be a priority to develop protection strategies that consider territorial characteristics and differential approaches to security.
- It is important to establish and reiterate a firm commitment between security institutions (the National Police and the Armed Forces) and civilian state institutions with the population. This is key to improving the protection of ex-combatants, social leaders, human rights defenders, migrants and refugees. The most immediate way to show this commitment is by strengthening the Ombudsman's Office (Defensoría del Pueblo) - an institution perceived as highly reliable, and which has capacity and legitimacy in most of the national territory. The government must ensure financial, human and technical resources so that the Early Warning System, which is highly focused territorially, has improved rapid response mechanisms.

Authors: CONPEACE Team | September 2022

CONPEACE

From Conflict Actors to Architects of Peace

Based at the University of Oxford's Global Security Programme, the CONPEACE Initiative focuses on changing security landscapes in marginalised spaces, especially in border regions during transitions from war to peace. Founded and led by Dr Annette Idler, CONPEACE's interdisciplinary research bridges marginalised communities and centres of political power, using a bottom-up methodology based on intensive fieldwork, conceptual frameworks on the non-state order, and regular stakeholder forums.

Canada

